

June 6, 2005

Steven C. LaTourette, Chairman
Subcommittee on Railroads
Transportation and Infrastructure Committee
U.S. House of Representatives

Dear Mr. LaTourette and members of the Subcommittee on Railroads:

Thank you for inviting me to testify before the Subcommittee on Railroads June 9th, 2005 hearing on "Amtrak Food and Beverage Operations." I will be prepared to present a summary of my experience aboard Amtrak on December 29th and 30th, 2004 where food service was not available for 18.5 hours.

The cause was a power failure throughout the train that resulted in no food service, no heat, and no restroom facilities. With mishandling and irresponsible decisions, the situation escalated to where passengers' health and safety were in jeopardy.

I am enclosing my letter to the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak) dated January 6, 2005 with the details of my experience to support my testimony at the hearing.

Sincerely,

Gary B. Preston
Enclosure

Amtrak Complaint Reference No. 1082791

Filed on 12/30/04 ~5:20 a.m. PST (8:20 a.m. EST)

Filed by Gary and Karen Preston

We were passengers on Train 11, Coach Car 15 on December 29, 2004 from Seattle, Washington to Sacramento, California. From the very start this trip was a series of increasingly serious mistakes that ultimately placed the passengers' health and safety in jeopardy. This whole fiasco was based on poor decisions and callous behaviors, not "acts of God", and it could have been prevented.

Train 11 did not even make it to Seattle on December 28th. At 10:00 AM on the 29th, Seattle passengers were bussed to Portland to board the train. We boarded the train after 2:00 PM. Right away, this put meal service behind schedule on the train, as lunch was not made available until after the train left Portland, around 2:30 PM. At that time it was also announced that dinner service would begin late with seating going through 9:00 PM. Then, beginning with our first stop, the cars lost electrical power whenever the train came to a stop. The snack car attendant announced this several times over the PA to explain that he could not run the cash register or heat food unless the train was moving. So from the very beginning, it was known that there were electrical problems that would interfere with service to passengers. Was this even known prior to leaving the Portland station?

When the train reached Chemult, Oregon the power went out as usual when we stopped, but this time it did not restart. This was about 8:30 PM. After some delay, it was announced that the train would continue to Klamath Falls, Oregon where repairs could be done. As it turned out, this arrival in Chemult marked the end of all heat, food service, onboard toilet facilities, and the PA system in some cars, including our car #15, was not working. Shortly after 9:00 PM the dining staff announced that the dining service was ended and that the 9:00 dinner reservations were cancelled. Since the snack bar was also closed, this left no food option. Some passengers went to the dining car and were directed to speak with the supervisor. A diabetic was finally given a salad and rolls, but other passengers were told that unless they had a medical condition, they could not get anything. A man asked to have just a plain piece of bread and was told no. Is it Amtrak's policy that a group of passengers can be told to go hungry and nothing will be available? Is the dining car staff trained to know who can go hungry? Or was it just a callous, miserly dining car supervisor?

When we reached Klamath Falls, no information was given about whether we could get off the train, go into the station to use toilets, or how long we would be there. Finally someone in our car (#15) forced the outside door open and found an Amtrak staff person outside. The Amtrak person acted irritated that we were asking questions. When he finally understood that we just wanted to know if we could get off to use the toilet, he calmed down and said yes. We also told him that not all cars could hear the announcements and we needed someone to come to car #15 to talk to us. For the rest of the night, whenever a passenger needed to use the toilet, it meant walking through the cold snowing weather into the station. And each time the outside door opened for this, it meant another icy blast of air into the train car.

Around midnight, most people in car 15 were trying to get some rest. Since there was not any heat, and had not been any heat since the 8:30 PM power failure, the coach cars were

cold. No one was providing anything to keep passengers warm. Going into the station was not an option because it was small and full of people who still wanted to board the train. Many passengers did not have warm clothing, and there were no blankets.

Around 4:00 AM we noted that no one had been in to our car to give us any information. At 4:00 AM someone in our car telephoned Amtrak to see what was happening and ask to have a conductor come to our car. The Amtrak person on the phone said that the Red Cross was coming and that buses would arrive between 6:00 and 7:00 AM to take us onward. A little later a conductor finally came to our car and gave us the same information, adding that we would go to Sacramento via bus. His name was Brad, and he was the only onboard person who took time to give us any information.

The Red Cross arrived after 5:00 AM with blankets, hot drinks, and donuts. How could this happen that the situation has escalated so out-of-control that we are declared a disaster by the Red Cross?!?! By this time, we had been without heat for 8 ½ hours, in a snowy mountain town, through a night when it continued to snow, and without any nourishment or assistance to get warm.

There were 2 men working inside the Klamath Falls station. They reiterated that busses would arrive around 7:00. When asked about food, one said that arrangements were being made for the buses to stop en route to Sacramento and that we would receive a hot meal. Two buses arrived at 7:30 AM and left with some passengers. The remaining 8 buses trickled in and the final bus did not arrive until 10:30 AM. By now, it had been 14 hours without heat or food service. (A Red Cross donut does NOT count as real food.) We were also assured that our checked luggage would be put on the same buses and would arrive in Sacramento with us.

Once we finally got on a bus, we learned from our driver that the food stop would be near Redding, California. So add another 2 ½ to 3 hours before we could get food. How could we have been so unrealistic to think that Amtrak would arrange for food as soon as possible? When we got to the designated stop, which was past Redding, it was a roadside rest area that was shut down for construction and we could not even exit. Since we were the last bus, the previous buses must have already encountered this, but no one had bothered to telephone our driver. He called and learned that the stop had been moved almost 20 miles further down the road. By the time we finally found the stop, it was 3:00 PM, which was 18 ½ hours since food service stopped. And the promised hot meal? A cold sandwich and bottle of water.

We finally arrived in Sacramento at 5:00 PM. No surprise at this point, but 2 of our 3 checked bags were not with us. The Sacramento staff told us it was likely that they were not even taken off the train in Klamath Falls! We do not understand how a train that is shut down for 12 hours cannot be unloaded of baggage. It took 2 more days for us to finally get our bags, and we had to make a special trip to the station to pick up the last bag.

This whole experience has been a horrendous display of neglect of the welfare and safety of passengers. From bad equipment to irresponsible decisions, it went from bad to worse.

- In freezing conditions, there should be immediate provisions for protecting passengers, whether or not repairs can be made and regardless of how much time it

will take. It is not OK to let 400 people, including many small children, elderly, and disabled, sit in freezing weather for hours.

- It is not OK to deny nourishment to passengers for as long as 18 ½ hours. Actually, it is not OK to force passengers to skip even one meal. There is no reason that some kind of cold foods could not be provided. Why are there no provisions for alternate food when power is lost? Why couldn't someone have called ahead to Klamath Falls and arranged for prepared food or groceries to be delivered to the train? No one should have the authority to deny a group of passengers a basic necessity such as food.
- It is not OK to fail to have someone keep passengers informed of what is being done. We should not have to call the 800 number to find out our status.
- It is not OK to mislead or lie to passengers, telling us we will receive hot food and that our bags will be handled properly, when neither will occur.
- It is not OK to have the Red Cross bear the cost of providing some comfort to relieve Amtrak negligence. We do not like the idea that our donations to the Red Cross are used to subsidize Amtrak's failures.

How could all of this happen? Some passengers said we will be offered future travel or can get refunds. They know this because they have gotten these in the past. Is Amtrak so poorly equipped and so poorly serviced that this is simply normal operations? It seems to be common knowledge that long-distance passenger trains run late and have breakdowns. It is amazing that these kinds of problems are accepted as routine operations. It is appalling that there can be so many problems that can pile on top of each other to create such outrageous situations as what occurred on Train 11, and that no one seems to be able to intervene to stop the escalation until we end up being declared a Red Cross disaster. There were so many opportunities for Amtrak personnel to implement actions to provide for the safety and comfort of passengers, but we could see nothing being done.

- We want an explanation of how this happened.
- We want to know what will be done to prevent passenger abuse again.
- We want to know that Amtrak personnel will protect passengers when equipment breakdowns do occur.
- We want Amtrak to reimburse the Red Cross for all their costs in this event.
- We want to be refunded the cost of our trip.
- We want to know who is held accountable for this happening and what the consequences are.
- We have been told that we will receive a telephone call in response to this letter and our complaint in order to resolve this. There is no way that this can be "resolved" for us. There is no way to undo the cold and hunger and being treated poorly. We want a letter, not just a telephone call, that will address our issues.

We cannot imagine ever wanting to take a train trip on Amtrak again.

Gary and Karen Preston
Sacramento, CA

January 6, 2005

National Railroad Passenger Corporation
60 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002

RE: Amtrak Complaint Reference No. 1082791

Dear Mr. David Gunn, President and CEO
Mr. David Laney, Chairman of the Board
The Honorable Norman Mineta, Secretary of Transportation
Mr. William Crosbie, Sr. Vice President Operations
Mr. Joseph McHugh, Vice President Government Affairs and Policy
Mr. Fred Weiderhold, Inspector General,

Because you are a member of the National Railroad Passenger Corporation Board of Directors and/or Executive Committee, we are sending you a copy of a letter to Amtrak Customer Relations. It is important for you to be aware of events that place Amtrak passengers in jeopardy, especially when those events are preventable. We hope that you will be able to implement changes so that future passenger's health and safety are better protected.

Respectfully,

Gary and Karen Preston

CC (via facsimile only):

Senate and House Committee Members for Transportation and Railroads

Senator John McCain	(202) 228-2862
Senator Barbara Boxer	(415) 956-6701
Representative Don Young	(202) 225-0425
Representative Jack Quinn	(202) 226-0347

Senate and House Members for California, 95821

Senator Dianne Feinstein	(202) 228-3954
Representative Daniel Lungren	(202) 226-1298

